

Spring 2002
Volume 2, Issue 1
Archives Hints

Appraisal of Archival Materials

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I recently read an article in a professional library journal about how libraries should identify historical treasures in their collections. The article discussed contacting a dealer to determine the monetary value of an item and summarily mentioned historical value, but neglected to discuss all of the other values that archivists attach to historical documents. This month's newsletter discusses how to perform a proper evaluation of your archives. Following on the heels of our collection development policy newsletter, we explore how such a policy aids the assessment of your historical records.

What is Appraisal?

In the archives field, the term appraisal refers to the process used to assess records and to determine those to keep permanently. Appraisal involves examining how something fits into an archival collection. Do the specific materials being considered belong at this collecting institution? Do they belong at another institution? Are the materials worth saving at all or should they just be thrown away? Archivists do not save everything and a good archivist will not add materials to her collection that are better suited to another institution's mission. It is important to have a collection development policy in place before appraising archives so that you have a thorough understanding of the scope of your collections and the collections of others in your community. Using appropriate tools, an archivist must use her best informed judgment to make decisions that are often crucial to the proper documentation of history.

How to Decide What to Keep

Though we may want to, it is impractical for a repository to keep everything. There is a need to review any potential accessions to focus our collections so that they are in compliance with our collection development policies and our users' needs. The cost of retention often overrides our desire to keep something. How integral are these records to our mission and goals? Our aim as collecting institutions is to fill a research need and meet our outlined documentation plan. To fill gaps identified in our collection development policy, it is to our greatest advantage to accept complete collections that provide as broad a view of a particular subject as possible—remember you do not want to compete with other organizations and a collection split among many

institutions becomes diluted and less valuable for research. Judge records as groups and not individually.

To judge the value of a collection, first determine what is important to keep for administrative, legal, or fiscal purposes. These types of records are usually found in an institutional, business, or government archives. Then, determine if there is any historical importance to the records. View the records as products of the activity for which they were created. Here are some points to consider: When were records created? Why? What was / is important about the content or the creator? Do the records provide significant information about people, places, or events defined in your collection development policy? Is this information useful to your researchers? Does this collection contain information about a time period or group that is under-documented? Are the records rare? How do these records relate to others in your collections and community?

Sometimes the actual record itself is of value and not just the information contained within the record. The records are said to have intrinsic value that may include monetary worth, but may also describe something with sentimental or some other intangible worth.

Primarily, we are looking to develop our collections to fill gaps in the historical / archival record that we have vowed to keep in our community. What is important historically to one community may not be to another. Offer collections that don't fit within your goals to institutions that are more appropriate. Actively pursue materials that do fit within your collecting scope. Determine what newly created materials in your community can help tell the historical story that your collection development policy outlines. Both old and new documents can be important archives. Justify your decisions by keeping a written record of what you've reviewed and why you made the decisions you did.

Every record is useful to some researcher, but you can't save everything. Appraisal is a process that should involve understanding as much as you can about your collections, your collecting goals, and a potential new donation or purchase. The tools and information provided on the reverse page are exceptionally useful for helping to determine whether the new materials should be accessioned by your institution, considered by another repository, or discarded.

More Information on Appraisal and Useful Appraisal Tools

****Appraisal Scorecard** - New York State Archives Web Site provides an exceptional introduction to appraisal and an appraisal tool with a useful list of questions that walks you step by step through the appraisal process. Though the site focuses on local government records, the methods can be applied to any type of Archives.

See: Backman, Prudence. *Appraisal of Local Government Records for Historical Value*. 1996.

<ftp://ftp.sara.nysed.gov/pub/rec-pub/local-rec-pub/lgtis50.pdf>

Another excellent introduction to appraisal:

Cook, Terry. *Overview of Appraisal: Why are We Here This Week*. Presentation to Appraisal Seminar. Melbourne, Australia, VIC Monash University, March 15, 1999. Text available at: <http://www.recordkeeping.com.au/march99/terrycookoverview.html>

An early standard text in the field of archival appraisal:

Schellenberg, Theodore. *The Appraisal of Modern Records*. Bulletins of the National Archives. No. 8 (October 1956) <http://www.nara.gov/arch/techinfo/bull8.html>

See Also: Archives and Information Consulting Services' *Links to Collection Development and Appraisal*

<http://www.archivesinfo.com/archives/linkappraisal.htm>